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Introduction: towards a theory of musical meaning (in India and elsewhere)

Martin Clayton

Nb. diacritical accents to be added later

... the meaning of a heard musical phrase consists primarily in the emotional and other *affective* mental processes and in the impulses to movement which it evokes, and in the cognitive awareness of its structure. Charles Myers (1937:59)

The hypothesis of the unity of the notion of meaning is not an insistence on a single unified literal concept "meaning"; rather, it is a commitment to the existence of a series of connections among the various senses of "means". Mark Johnson (1987:176)

Abstract

This article introduces a special issue of the *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* on 'music and meaning'. It does so by offering some thoughts on 'meaning' in the context of North Indian *raga* music; and by sketching the outline of an approach to musical meaning influenced by perspectives from ethnomusicology, psychological anthropology, cognitive science, and cultural studies. The article proposes that all music is necessarily meaningful insofar as it offers to the perceiving subject possibilities for action and imagination, and that meaning is neither wholly dependant on semiosis, nor on the apprehension of formal or structural relationships.¹

Introduction

In what ways is music meaningful? The essays in this volume address some of the many possible answers to this question. My purpose in this introduction is to offer a framework capable of accommodating all of the approaches represented within these covers. This

¹ Acknowledgements...

introduction places stress on aspects of meaning not given detailed attention elsewhere, and is thus intended as a complement to the other contributions. I offer these thoughts as a small contribution towards the development of an ethnomusicological theory of musical meaning - something I consider to have been a pressing but unfulfilled need for many years.

The volume which you hold in your hand has a history too long and convoluted to relate here in full, but a quick sketch may help illuminate the issues it considers. First, it emerges as a tentative step forward from the study published last year as *Time in Indian Music* (Clayton 2000) – an attempt at a theoretical model of rhythm, metre and form in North Indian raga music. This book's later accretions betray my increasing fascination with the relationship between music's manipulation of the human experience of time, and the discourses many of us employ in order to rationalise and interpret that experience – the discursive realm to which the constructions of metre and rhythm, tal and lay belong. What, I began to wonder, is the relationship between that *experience* of raga music *in the moment*, and what we might call its *meaning*?

Centuries of theoretical discourse can be traced (in principle at least), which considers the affect of Indian music, its bhava (roughly speaking, emotional expression) and the rasa (aesthetic essence) which that bhava engenders in the listener.² There seems to be broad agreement within modern North Indian music culture that of crucial importance to bhava, and therefore to rasa, is the melodic entity raga (with other features such as metre, tempo, timbre, song text and so on performing ancillary roles). Raga has been described by musicologists

² The term bhav is sometimes used by North Indian musicians to refer to emotional expression in general. In the classical rasa, theory various aspects of bhava, their subdivisions and their relationships are described: of central importance are the eight *sthayibhavas*, each of which evokes a corresponding rasa. Sthayibhava is translated as 'emotive stereotype' (Sanyal 1987:166) or 'permanent emotion' (Rowell 1992: 329).

within and without India as possessing numerous aspects (scale type, transilience, tessitura, characteristic motion and so on), and yet performers and scholars seem agreed that the essence of raga – that which gives rise to bhava – is not reducible to those features, but is knowable only through direct experience (performance or listening). I wondered, and continue to do so, about the extent to which bhava and rasa (or rather the experiences which those terms describe) are effected through the manipulation of participants' temporal experience through the experience of organised sound.

Indic musicology and criticism has also long recognised another, associational level of meaning: thus for instance Yaman is an evening rag, Miyan ki Malhar a raga of the rainy season, and Pahadi evokes the hill regions from which it takes its name. Associations of performance time and context are related both to a historical role of music as accompaniment to drama and to the origins of (part of) the modern raga repertory in seasonal and/or functional vernacular songs. It is a small step, nonetheless, from the recognition that Malhar is a melody performed during the monsoon, to the interpretation that the raga itself (whatever 'itself' may mean) invokes the rains, or that its performance elicits emotional responses characteristic of the season (for instance, that of longing for an absent lover). The raga does (or at least it can) give rise to such a response, although one may wonder to what extent this is because listeners, knowing its associations, expect it to do so. The relationships between the sounds people make and experience, discourses of various types, and what people come to believe the music 'means' are as endlessly fascinating as they are complex.

In the course of pondering these issues, a number of other influences came together. Editing a video on the khyal singing of Veena Sahasrabuddhe, one of the genre's finest performers, I had to cut together footage from two cameras, one focusing on Veena and the other on her student and daughter-in-law Jayanti Sahasrabuddhe. ³ Watching the two singers,

³ See Clayton 1999.

as well as others who came into shot (including myself), I came to conceive of all participants in the session as being somehow locked into the same experience – focussed on the same events in the same space and time, at some level synchronised together. The music, I speculated, was somehow facilitating this synchrony, what might be termed a process of *entrainment*.⁴ What if we turned a standard interpretation on its head: what if, instead of believing the timing aspects of the music to be instrumental (in allowing the essence of the music to create its affect), the timing *was* the affect? In other words, what if the very experience of an interactional synchrony - listener with musical sound - *was* the experience which the discourse of bhava and rasa sought to interpret? What if our (musicologists') concentration on discourse (however 'emic') habitually blocks a deeper appreciation of what goes on in the experience of music?

I was reminded of the splendid exchanges between Leonard Meyer and Charles Keil, originating more than 30 years previously, contests between musical meaning as the syntactic coding of emotional response and as the direct experience of feeling through synchronised action (Keil's 'groove').⁵ I began to consider the 'groove' of raga performance - this aspect of synchronous interaction - as an elemental level of musical 'meaning', logically prior to (although in practice inseparable from) interpretive discourses. The same ideas also suggested the theme for a one-day conference, entitled 'Music and Meaning', which was held at the Open University in November 1998.⁶

⁴ My thinking on these questions has been influenced by the work of various earlier scholars, including Mari Riess Jones (see e.g. Jones and Yee 1993) and William Condon (see e.g. 1982, 1985).

⁵ See in particular Meyer 1956, Keil 1994 [1966]).

⁶ Organised by my colleagues Kevin Dawe and Tony Langlois on behalf of both the British Forum for Ethnomusicology and the Open University's Musics and Cultures Research Group.

An early proposal for a themed issue of BJE was put aside, for a variety of reasons, but this idea was resurrected on hearing Timothy Rice's brilliant keynote paper to the British Musicologies Conference in July 1999. It seemed to me that Rice, in his engagement with the role of metaphor in the construction and negotiation of meaning, was attacking related issues (I will discuss this relationship below). I am delighted that he accepted the invitation to contribute to this volume.

The rest of this volume has fallen together in a haphazard, but (I think) felicitous manner: Frank Kouwenhoven's thoughts on the programmatic discourses around Chinese qin music were presented at the 1998 conference; Gregory Barz's thoughts on meaning, temporality and a variety of social processes were (to some extent at least) a response to that conference's challenge to reconsider Keil's groovology and what it might still have to offer. I invited Anna Morcom to contribute to the volume after discussing with her the relationship between music, song and dramatic meaning in Hindi film music, while Jochen Eisentraut's paper landed on my desk quite by chance – his discussion of an adopted music, samba as performed by a group of enthusiasts in north Wales, provides yet another approach to the always entangled domains of sound, experience and discourse, and the way they combine to construct 'meaning'.

The meaning of meaning

So much for the prelude - it falls to me to try to establish, however provisionally, a theoretical basis and context for this volume's debates. A good place to start might be with the meaning of the term 'meaning'. What, you might reasonably ask, do I and the other contributors to this volume *mean* by 'meaning'?

My first thoughts towards answering this question were of the necessity of keeping the definition broad, given the wide range of perspectives it should accommodate. On the face of it Leonard Meyer provided such a definition when he suggested back in 1956, that music has

meaning if it *refers to something outside of itself* [ref] - a broad and apparently helpful definition, but nonetheless one that is problematic in that it reproduces a basic ontological fallacy: that music is essentially a *thing* which refers to another *thing*. The problems inherent in such an idea have been discussed often, and by writers of very different methodological training and ideological orientation. I cite below four examples: from John Blacking, Nicholas Cook and Roger Scruton (writing specifically about music) and Paul Ricoeur (writing more generally, but I think with relevance to music nonetheless).⁷

The "objective facts" of musical structures may *seem* to be there for all to hear and see; but in reality they are not. The meaning of musical signs is ambiguous... (Blacking 1995:229)

... a musical culture is, in essence, a repertoire of means for imagining music; it is the specific pattern of divergences between the experience of music on the one hand, and the images by means of which it is represented on the other, that gives a musical culture its identity... I argue that the structural wholeness of musical works should be seen as a metaphorical construction [...] (Cook 1990:4,5)

In one sense the work of music has no identity: no *material* identity, that is. For the work is what we hear or are intended to hear *in* a sequence of sounds, when we hear them as music. And this - the intentional object of musical perception - can be identified only through metaphors, which is to say, only through descriptions that are false. (Scruton 1997:108)

Meaningful action is an object for science only under the condition of a kind of objectification which is the equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing. [...] In the same way that interlocution is overcome in writing, interaction is overcome in numerous situations in which we treat action as a fixed text. (Ricoeur 1971:537-538)

⁷ For further discussion on musical ontology see for instance Bohlman 1999, Goehr 1992, Ingarden 1986, Levinson 1997, Small 1998 and Smith 1979.

I might then be forgiven for thinking that the ontological argument does not need to be repeated here. Nonetheless, I'm not sure that the implications for musical meaning of this realisation have been worked through satisfactorily (Scruton, for instance, goes on to treat music as quasi-material – his 'intentional object' – despite his own philosophical queasiness.) If (objectified) music is not a natural fact but a construction, an aspect of cultural knowledge, then where can its meaning be found? If meaning is to be found solely in the ascriptions of listeners, as some would hold, in what ways (if at all) is it generated or *communicated* by music?

Is it possible to devise a definition of meaning - a definition useful for music studies - that problematises music's ontological status while also accounting for our intuition that musical experience is meaningful? A definition that takes account of the temporal, experiential aspects of music to which I referred above, *as well as* the kinds of structural, syntactical and semiotic aspects of meaning described by musicologists? Can we talk of music being meaningful both in relation to its apparent ontological status, and in relation to processual aspects of lived musical experience? It seems to me that these questions have not been satisfactorily answered to date.

Perhaps it is necessary, after all, to paraphrase the citations above. Music's apparent existence as text or as form is made possible only by the exercise of the human imagination in rationalising and attempting to fix experience. Music as text (music as form, etc) is an artifact of discourse, brought into being through the operation of metaphor: yet most accounts of meaning in aesthetic, semiotic or structural terms presuppose the existence of this imaginary artifact.⁸

⁸ I am influenced here by Lakoff and Johnson's classic account of the role of metaphor in human thought (1980), and by these authors' later publications.

What we call 'music' then, is in fact better described as an abstraction from the processes of ritual interaction Small describes as 'musicking' (1998). Whatever else musicking is about, we should not forget that it is experienced by people, in time, physically as well as mentally, embodied as well as imagined. Generations of musicologists have puzzled over the relationship between form and meaning, in many cases trapped by their own mentalism and unable to escape their own ontological assumptions - and thereby frequently mistaking the wood for the trees (if you will forgive the metaphor).

Musical experiences - experiences of 'musicking' - can be *imagined* as bounded entities (the ritual framing of musical 'events' enables this process).⁹ These entities can be explained metaphorically as 'structures', 'forms' or 'works', which can in turn be imagined as networks of relationships between bounded musical 'elements'. An account of musical meaning should consider the processes by which these 'elements' operate, rather than taking their result as a given: this is especially important in ethnomusicology, where we cannot take it for granted that such processes work in similar ways for people in all times and places.

It may be that for musicking humans, the impulse to provide analogical or metaphorical interpretations for musical experience is something close to universal. Be that as it may, these interpretations must be terribly transient and unstable - unless and until, that is, we start to fix them through paramusical discourse. This is precisely what happens through the fixing of those imaginary entities notes, chords, motives and the rest, and the imaginary relationships we call symphonies, ragas and the like.

What we conventionally describe as musical meaning is the way in which musical elements and structures are understood to relate to the world – which seems to me a futile endeavour so long as we fail to recognise that these elements and structures are themselves *imagined* by means of metaphors derived from the relationship between individual and

⁹ On the framing of musical/ritual events, see for instance Stone 1982, Turner 1986.

environment.¹⁰ And further, I would contend that a great deal of aesthetic and semiotic analysis falls into just this trap, as does any structural analysis which fails to take account of the contingency of musical structure. In all of these fields, our scholarly imagination is constrained, as Steven Feld pointed out back in 1974, by the linguistic analogy (either directly applied, or adopted indirectly via its application in other social sciences). This remains a problem, and the need Feld identified – to build theories in ethnomusicology which transcend the linguistic analogy – remains acute.

The perception of meaning

Are we any closer to that sought-after definition of meaning? One of the most significant problems is the gap in existing models between perception and meaning, and the apparent need to link the two through *formal* understanding. One possible way around this problem is offered by the ecological theory of perception put forward by James Gibson - a somewhat idiosyncratic approach to perception which has had little impact on musicology.¹¹ Gibson's approach completely rethinks more established views of the processes involved.

The views Gibson criticises describe perception in terms of the processing of information: in visual perception, according to information-processing models, light strikes the retina and is transformed into information which can be processed by the brain; this cognitive processing allows us to recognise objects, their properties and relations; and finally, having processed all this information, we can make judgements about objects and events in the world and take appropriate action. This paradigm has carried over into music psychology: sound waves strike

¹⁰ See Johnson 1987.

¹¹ Although I am indebted to Eric Clarke for his interpretation and application of Gibson's ideas (forthcoming). The influence of Gibson is also acknowledged by Marc Leman in his study of schema theory in music (1995).

the ear and are transformed into information which the brain can process, recognising notes, chords, motives and so on... until finally, at some (usually indeterminate) later stage a listener may interpret the music's meaning and respond appropriately.

Gibson viewed the process rather differently: in his view perception is best viewed as the interaction between animal and environment. The way an animal perceives is by actively scanning available information for the possibilities it affords. The animal does this by recognising patterns of change and invariance. For example, according to Gibson's model when we see a glass of water we can perceive directly from the patterns of change and invariance in light energy, the proximity of something which affords the possibility of drinking. As Gibson says,

The world of physical reality does not consist of meaningful things. The world of ecological reality [...] does. If what we perceived were the entities of physics and mathematics, meanings would have to be imposed on them. But if what we perceive are the entities of environmental science, their meanings can be *discovered*. (p33)

For Gibson then, what we perceive is a world of meaningful things - meaningful in the sense that they have what he calls 'affordances' for the perceiving subject. The implications of such a view for music psychology, if accepted, are profound: ecological perception offers the possibility of a direct - and instantaneous - apprehension of what a musical experience *means* for us.

In *The senses considered as perceptual systems* (1966), Gibson considers the particular properties and affordances of auditory information, particularly in comparison with visual ("Compression waves from a vibratory event", pp.15 ff). "The correspondence of sound waves to their source [...] means that information about an event is physically present in the air around the event." Sound, he continues, passes around obstacles and conveys little information about the surfaces from which it is reflected (in contrast to light), whereas "the information

about the temporal structure of the event that caused it and the vibratory frequency of this event are given with great precision." Furthermore, animals (including humans) themselves are sources of sound: "each animal is often surrounded by a vibratory field and [...] the waves specify a great deal about the animal." (1966:17). Our auditory system is moreover particularly well developed in allowing judgement of the direction from which sound originates.

It follows from this that – to the extent to which the senses can be isolated – auditory information is particularly meaningful in terms of what it tells us about events and living creatures, the temporal dimension of events and their spatial orientation. Extrapolating from Gibson, I suggest that as a result, auditory information has a number of obvious pragmatic applications. One simple example is that it can specify the location and identity of an animal that we might wish to hunt, or fear being hunted by. Another is that the production and reception of sound may be a privileged medium through which we can coordinate action with other people. By synchronising our attentional rhythms to those we detect in an auditory stimulus (such as sounds produced by another human), we can achieve not only synchronisation of action (as in dance) but a profound sense of *connectedness* to other people, and (in our imaginations at least) to spirits, Gods and the like. The particular affordances of auditory information should therefore be considered as such (allowing, of course, for the fact that they are almost always available simultaneously with visual, haptic, taste-smell and other kinds of information). This is an important reason why it is potentially misleading to interpret the nature and significance of music primarily through visual representations.

According to Gibson's theory, musical experience (including but not restricted to auditory information) can be considered as *directly* meaningful, inasmuch as it affords directly perceivable possibilities to the listener. This position makes intuitive sense for me, since my own experiences of music include many instances in which I have realised, extremely rapidly, that music afforded possibilities... of dancing, singing along, annoying a parent, or whatever:

introspection suggests that this realisation can occur well before I have had a chance to come to definite conclusions, even subconsciously, about that music's tonality, motivic or formal structure, or metrical regularity. As Nicholas Cook puts it:

To write music, to understand its techniques, or even to play an instrument requires time, application and specialized knowledge. But when music is heard, the results of all this are somehow synthesized into an immediate and intrinsically rewarding experience that does not, as a precondition, depend upon the listener having any kind of trained understanding of what he hears. (Cook 1990:2)

The possibility that this "immediate and intrinsically rewarding experience" is in fact due to the perception of patterns of change and of invariance in auditory information of a kind normally overlooked, deserves serious investigation.

What other kind of things can a musical experience afford? I don't think there can be such a thing as a finite list, but here are a few possibilities:

- musical experience affords the experience of groove
- musical experience affords a sense of belonging to a community
- musical experience of certain kinds affords the imagination of abstract formal structure and the conceptualisation of 'musical works'
- musical experience affords the possibility of argument with friends over the relative merits of rock bands or symphonies
- musical experience affords the possibility of imagining oneself to be in communion with one's gods or ancestors

and so on... It may be, indeed, that this approach has particular benefits in addressing micro-level processes of the kind described by Keil - processes which are particularly hard to describe in words precisely because they are the least closely related to linguistic modes of signification. Of course, exactly what kinds of patterns we recognise in auditory information

(and in the information available simultaneously through other senses) which allows these kind of perceptions, is a subject for much further research.

The ecological view has a number of consequences which accord with my intuitions regarding musical meaning, namely: meaning is interactional, in that it is generated in relation to the perceiving subject; a single event can have multiple affordances for each perceiving subject; and music can be *directly perceived as meaningful*, independent of formal understanding. I believe that this offers a useful way of looking at musical meaning. Insofar as the category 'music' is a cultural rather than a natural fact, *anything which we call music is necessarily meaningful*. Any musical event is meaningful in so far as it offers affordances to an individual: it may offer multiple affordances to each individual simultaneously, and it offers a more or less different set of affordances to each individual.

Between perception, semiosis and discourse

My purpose in this paper is not, I should make clear, to dismiss the potential of music to do semiotic work: study of the the things which music can signify and the ways in which it does so is of course a hugely important dimension of the study of meaning. The potential of music to signify could, indeed, be listed as amongst its 'affordances'. What I do intend, however, is to help to redress a balance which has tilted overwhelmingly towards semiotic approaches and away from more phenomenological, experiential and/or non-symbolic studies.¹²

The potential of music to signify, then, is not in question. What we need to consider is the mechanism by which a continuous flow of auditory information can come to be experienced as a sequence of signifying musical 'elements'. This has certainly yet to be answered satisfactorily: nor is it likely to be, so long as many musicologists and psychologists persist in the belief that the conventional 'elements of music', music's notables, comprise the

¹² See Leman (1995:180-185) on non-symbolic approaches to meaning formation in music.

building-blocks of musical cognition. A number of recent applications of cognitive science do hint at future directions nonetheless: for instance, Zbikowski's application of categorisation theory and its relation to motivic analysis, or Leman's application of schema theory to what he calls 'tonal semantics'.¹³

Again, Gibson's work suggests ways in which we might approach the conceptualisation of musical 'elements': "The judgement of "same" reflects the tuning of a perceptual system to the invariants of stimulus information that specify the same real place, the same real object, or the same real person. [...] only the information required to identify a thing economically tends to be picked up from a complex of stimulus information. All the other available information that would be required to specify its unique and complete identity in the whole universe of things is not attended to." (1966:278, 286).

Recent work in psychological anthropology aimed at bridging the gap between cognitive models and schemas on the one hand and 'cultural knowledge' on the other are also helpful in pointing a way forward.¹⁴ Nonetheless, relatively little of this work gives serious attention to music, or auditory information in general: I would suggest therefore that far from offering ready-made paradigms for application to music research, these theories really need to be developed further with music in mind. In other words, I believe that (ethno)musicology ought to be doing more to contribute a phonocentric perspective to the development of the human sciences, rather than continuing to address its subject through the distortions of visual and linguistic analogies (as argued, in the former case, by F. Joseph Smith).

¹³ See Lakoff (1987) on categorisation theory.

¹⁴ See e.g. Shore (1996) on culture as meaning construction; Strauss and Quinn (1997) on the relationship of schema theory and connectionism with anthropological conceptions of meaning.

In my view, semiotic theories developed in a phonocentric context are likely to give more convincing accounts of musical meaning than those which remain too closely linked to linguistic or structural models. (For the purposes of this paper, a highly condensed survey of current semiotic theories would serve little purpose: my silence should not be taken as dismissal however, but as an attempt to direct attention to the question of how we recognise 'things' in music which may signify, and to consider whether music may also be meaningful in ways which resist semiotic description.

A further area of concern for this volume is the role of paramusical discourse in the construction of musical meaning. Many ethnomusicologists would agree that we should transcend a situation in which musical meaning is seen only in relation to music imagined as objective fact. Yet this is a trap which many ethnomusicologists have also fallen into: even an ethnographic study which eschews notation or technical vocabulary will often address structural relations between musical and social 'facts'. It is worth thinking a little more about the processes through which musical 'facts' and their meanings come to be fixed (or at least, how boundaries for their negotiation come to be set).

Even if linguistic discourse is not necessary to meaningful experience, it plays an essential role in the fixing of meaning - discourse of various kinds can be deployed in the limitation of imagination, in persuading people that a musical experience offers certain affordances and not others (for instance, in the case of a symphony concert, dancing in the aisles). Discourse can be both creative, in revealing ways of hearing and understanding music, and limiting. In either case it is linked to the exercise of power, as in the case of the music academy or university department. It is well worth our considering our own inescapable role in this process, as academics, researchers and writers of authoritative texts.

A chain of argument

Perhaps it would be helpful if I were to summarize my argument up to this point.

1. What we call 'music' is an abstraction derived by interpreting an experience in which our attention has been focussed primarily on auditory information. (Of course, we cannot focus *totally* on sound, while conversely anyone with access to sound information will attend to it to some degree. Experience which we call 'musical' is thus distinctive in the degree of our attentiveness to sound; and perhaps in the extent to which sound information is understood in a non-linguistic mode.)

2. We do not passively perceive and subsequently decode sonic information, so much as actively scan sound energy for patterns of which we can make sense. Auditory information which contains recognised patterns of invariance and change can be perceived as offering or suggesting affordances, and therefore as meaningful. Thus, music is directly meaningful in so far as it offers an individual perceptible affordances.

3. Some of the ways in which we can make sense of auditory information - some of music's affordances - are well known to musicology. These ways are all dependent on the application of metaphor (in particular the ontological metaphors by which we describe 'music' as an aesthetic object comprising structural relations between elements; also important are spatial and orientational metaphors such as the 'height' of pitch). If we understand music according to these metaphors, it can be analysed in structural or semiotic terms, either of which can describe some of the apparent musical 'meaning' of musical 'texts'.

4. It is common - perhaps especially familiar within Western classical music culture - for people to try to fix these metaphorically imagined structures (for instance through notation) and the meanings which those structures afford (through critical or scholarly discourse). These discourses, which attempt to fix meanings and to constrain or direct imagination, are profoundly connected with the exercise of power. (Hence the notion that music can only truly

be understood through the medium of music theory, and the institutional barriers which exclude alternative readings - or, indeed, the construction of alternative texts.)

5. The process by which we come to comprehend a continuous flow of musical sound as a segmented flow of musical elements needs to be better understood, as does the relationship of this process to other areas of cultural knowledge. Whether addressed in terms of cognitive models and schemas, image schemata, categorisation, or the perception of invariance, it is clear that any stream of musical sound affords the perception of musical elements, and that these identified elements can act as signifiers which relate music to other dimensions of human experience. This is the subject matter of semiotic analysis.

6. Accepted forms of discourse nonetheless hide dimensions of meaning - other affordances - independent of or contradictory to these basic ontological assumptions. They also make the contingent nature of those assumptions invisible to many of those who contribute to that discourse.

7. The debate as to whether musical 'texts' have meaning or not; and if so what kind of meaning they have (representational, associational, etc) misses the point in some essential ways. This kind of debate assumes the literal existence of a musical text or structure, whose 'meaning' is the subject of debate. A more open and productive definition would say that whatever people can make sense of in music, whatever it affords, *is* its meaning. A piece of music exists as a form of cultural knowledge, its conceptualization afforded by the experience of organized sound and fixed by paramusical discourse.

8. Ethnomusicologists have described a variety of ways in which sound information may be understood as meaningful. All are (necessarily) metaphorically imagined, but not all are dependent on the notion of a structured text. Examples of attempts to describe musical experience in such alternative terms are Charles Keil's notions of 'groove' and 'participatory discrepancy'.

9. There are almost certainly many more ways in which musical experiences afford understanding - in other words, are meaningful. These include the ways in which auditory information can be understood metaphorically as patterned movement *independent of* its parsing into elemental notes, chords and the like. This kind of meaning may be radically different from the kinds of meaning uncovered by structural or semantic studies, in that it may be more akin to gestural communication - continuous, imagistic and non-hierarchical.¹⁵ As David McNeill puts the distinction: "Language has the effect of segmenting and linearizing meaning. What might be an instantaneous thought is divided up and strung out through time [...] Gestures are different in every way. This is because they are themselves multidimensional and present meaning complexes without undergoing segmentation or linearization. Gestures are *global* and *synthetic* and *never hierarchical*." (McNeill 1992:19, emphasis in original)

As Timothy Rice points out elsewhere in this volume, we need to clear what we mean when we write about meaning, and I have addressed several different aspects in my argument thus far. I subscribe, nonetheless, to Mark Johnson's 'unity of the notion of meaning' (see the epigraph to this article), believing that ultimately we need to recognise that musical experience is meaningful in a variety of ways, that these ways are interconnected, and that the relationships between different dimensions of meaning are important.

Epilogue I: back to *rasa*

Having begun this discussion with a reference to the Indian theory of *rasa*, it might be useful to return to that same theme now. How does *rasa* relate to the ideas discussed above? Does it offer insights from which modern ethnomusicology can learn? I think the answer to this last question may be affirmative, but before explaining how, I should offer a disclaimer. The few

¹⁵ The incorporation of the idea of 'gesture' into accounts of musical meaning is discussed by, for instance, Coker (1972) and Middleton (1993).

references in this article are hardly adequate, and nor can they be, as a discussion of the concept of *rasa*, its background, application, and relationship to the traditions of Sanskrit philosophy in general. My references are highly selective, and highlight those dimensions which seem to me particularly pertinent to my own speculations.¹⁶ I should also point out that, although often discussed in relation to music in India, the *rasa* theory developed in the context of dramaturgy, and no serious attempt has been made to adapt it to musical performance per se. To my knowledge, no scholar, Indian or otherwise, has ever offered a convincing explanation of *how* particular melodic entities (*ragas*) afford the perception of particular *rasas* (to borrow Gibson's language for a moment).

Having said all that, I do think there are features of *rasa* theory which seem consistent with the approaches described above. *Rasa* could be described as suggesting a kind of phenomenological approach to musical meaning and affect, and one which privileges sound itself rather than visual analogy. I am thinking of the following aspects in particular:

- *rasa* theory highlights the role of the perceiving subject, and the importance of empathy or sensitivity¹⁷
- *rasa* theory privileges *experience* and affect: the work of art succeeds or fails by its ability to evoke aesthetic response in the listener/viewer
- the word *rasa*, meaning literally juice or essence, suggests something flowing and dynamic, rather than a solid and static entity (Sharma 1970:57, Rowell 1982:368)

¹⁶ Perhaps neither more nor less so than is Martinez, when he attempts to recast *rasa* as a kind of Peircian semiotic theory (1996).

¹⁷ *sahradaytva*: interpreted by Sanyal as "sensitivity [...] literally the quality of having a heart" (1987:168); by Rowell as "empathy... 'to be at heart with' " (1982:328; and (perhaps fancifully) by myself as a kind of proto-entrainment theory.

- rasa resists the linkage of affect to structure (proper structure is considered important in musical and dramaturgical theory, but not – *pace* Meyer – as the primary means for generating affect)
- the perception of rasa is described in terms of a metaphor of 'tasting'; this metaphor is used as a means for resisting reductionism (Bharata's *Natyashastra* draws an analogy between rasa and the taste of a delicacy, which is distinct from the individual tastes of its ingredients) (Sharma 1970:58-9)

Furthermore, while the application of rasa theory to music remained underdeveloped, it is worth remarking that the theory emerged within a culture not given to downplaying the importance of *sound* – the highest category to Hindu scripture is that referred to as *shruti*, literally 'the heard', while there is no Indian equivalent to the 'tablets of stone'. Perhaps it is for this reason that theorists allowed the affective power of music to remain within the irreducible domain of sound – something from which Western musicology could certainly learn.

Epilogue II: finally, back to this volume

I have deliberately concentrated in this introduction on issues not covered in detail elsewhere in this volume, but nonetheless - as I hope will become clear - each article's concerns are related to those I have outlined above. The sorts of issues with which this volume is concerned are the role of metaphor and of discourse in the construction and contestation of meaning; the ascription of meaning to music and its problematic link to 'structure'; the multiplicity of possible and concurrent meanings generated by any performance; the possibility that music sounds and practices afford similar meanings in quite different cultural environments; and the exercise of power in the fixing of meanings by social elites and scholars.

The issues addressed by contributors cluster around a number of themes, namely:

a. the plurality of metaphors available for musical understanding, and the ways in which they underpin different ascriptions of 'meaning'. (The main theme of Rice's article.)

b. the phenomenon of similar music (particularly, in the age of recording, similar patterns of auditory information) being understood, that is affording meaning, in very different social situations. How can studying this help us to understand the interplay of the affordances of sound and the metaphorical imagination of socially-situated listeners? (This theme is addressed by Rice, besides being the main focus of the articles of Eisentraut and Morcom.)

c. the various ways in which people attempt to fix musical meaning through analytical and interpretive discourses, the contingency of the meanings so fixed and of their relationship to 'structure', and the exercise of power in the fixing. (This theme is central to Kouwenhoven's article, and implicit in most others.)

d. the ways in which a musical experience refers beyond itself to experiences in other times and places, thus perhaps affording a kind of comprehension of the relatedness of different spheres of activity (An important theme of Barz's article).

If the articles published here can play a part in stimulating future work on 'meaning' in (ethno)musicology, then this volume will have achieved its objective.

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Note on the author

to be completed